



# “Bread From Heaven”

a sermon by

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Our scripture lesson for the afternoon comes from Exodus chapter 16, selected verses. You will recall that Moses was commissioned by God to lead Israel out of slavery and into the promised land. In the chapters before these verses Pharaoh was assailed by plagues when he was finally persuaded to let God's people go. Moses and his brother Aaron gathered the nation, and led them out into the wilderness where they were pursued again by Pharaoh and the Egyptian army, until they were drowned in the Red Sea. All the while, the Israelites were complaining to Moses for leading them out of Egypt, fearing the unknown freedom more than the known slavery.

“The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not”...“I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.’” In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of the dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’” The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing left over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted...The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey...The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.”

A month and a half in the wilderness with no food or water, in search of the promised land that was to appear like some sort of oasis in the desert, and is it any wonder the Israelites had taken to their protests. I once heard a Jewish comedian joke, ‘No wonder it took them 40 years to cross through the wilderness, all they did was drag their feet and complain, ‘It’s so hot, Moses; we’re hungry, Moses.’ If I were Moses my people would never have claimed the promised land, because I’d have ditched us in the desert until we quit our griping.’” But the complaints of the Israelites were grounded in a deeply rooted, existential crisis of faith and life. Make no mistake, the Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt. Their tiny nation clinging to the ancient promises given to Abraham and sandwiched between the behemoth empires of the Persians and the Babylonians with their power-hungry gods. There is no way to idealize the state of bondage, oppression, and fear that they had faced in Egypt, and yet the Israelites long for this time when their empty stomachs remind them that they have left a known evil for a wilderness pilgrimage into the unknown. “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this

whole assembly with hunger.” These are harsh words and they are spoken in fear, for the people had yet to fully understand what it meant to be called out of slavery by God. After all, God was just establishing his track record of faithfulness, and so far being God’s chosen people meant being scorned by your enemies. Held captive by the ruling majority. Mocked for your beliefs. No other nation in history had been the benefactors of God’s power and favor, no one had ever heard of a god- all powerful, otherworldly, and subject to whims and tantrums that would reap desolations upon the earth- who would want to be in relationship with human beings. God hid in the temple behind a line that was marked by a thick curtain, a boundary that meant profaning the holy and losing your life if crossed. So it stands to reason that they had no reason to believe God would stand for them. Not here in the wilderness. After all, Moses, how do we know that he didn’t just lead us into the wilderness to leave us here to die?

So just as the Israelites’ complaints are justified, so too is their disobedience. “Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not” Then Moses said to the people, ‘This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, and the Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less but when they measured it out all was equal. And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul.” The Israelites were not accustomed to provision. They were accustomed to providing for themselves by storing up as much as possible for themselves rather than thriving off of a steady diet of dependance upon God. Is it any wonder that some grabbed more than they needed? When the bread came down from heaven and was offered to them- wouldn’t we ourselves clamor to hold on to all that we could get for fear of being denied the future provision of what was needed for life?

In fact, each and every day aren’t we faced with this delimna and choose seek the known satisfaction of slavery to the old ways of our own self reliance rather than risk starvation in the freedom offered by God when he promises that he will provide us with daily bread- bread from heaven, bread for life, each and every day? We may roll our eyes at the Israelites here, but don’t we do the same as they did, stuffing our pockets with all we can gather for ourselves despite having a history with this God of the covenant working to our advantage, and despite having read in our own scriptures, ‘do not worry for tomorrow, for tomorrow will take care of itself.’ And, ‘do not store up for yourselves treasures here on earth, where moths and rust destroy.’”? Are we not just as resistant to surrendering to the idea that we worship a God who promises provision- so much so that we can follow him into the wilderness and expect to be fed? Centuries of wisdom and lessons from history and we still so often stand beside that first community of faith in their disbelief and ignorance and unwillingness to accept the fact that the blessing of God’s provision will be rationed for us. To understand that when God tells us to take only what we need, it means that the promise of God is not that we will be stuffed with blessing each and every day but, if we do our part, we will surely be filled. Which means that we may sometimes feel that familiar hunger, but if we respond in faith will surely be sustained by a simple meal for the body and spirit, not in a super-sized feast, but in daily bread for life.

When I was a chaplain at a large trauma center in New Jersey a few years ago, the story was told of a Jewish woman who was being treated for a vicious cancer who was suffering from a deep despair. Despite her doctor’s encouragement that she would actually recover from her illness, she believed that she had no hope for survival and refused to eat a thing. They tried everything to get her to eat, but her depression had killed her appetite, and in her weakened

condition her health took a sharp turn for the worst despite a positive prognosis. Her doctor, one of the finest in the field even today, was confounded by what to do because her anxiety and fear had eroded not only her body, but was burrowing its way into the very depths of her soul as her interest in life faded radically by the day. Early one morning he stood in a small bakery when he spotted a loaf of freshly baked challa. Challah is the bread traditionally eaten on the eve of the Jewish Sabbath. Baked and beautifully braided, a portion of it is burned to recall the Passover feast of the Jews, and the sacrifice in the temple they made to honor the Lord for the good things he has done for them. He purchased the loaf and took it to his patient.

As he sat beside her bed he reminded her of the story of God's provision for his people in the wilderness, of the manna from heaven that was provided to sustain them when they felt alone and afraid. He recalled for her the celebration feast they share even today when they remember the story of God's promises and the faithfulness of his blessing those 40 days and throughout history. And he watched as tears streamed down her face when he handed her the freshly baked loaf and said, you do not give bread to those for whom you have no hope. When she went home from the hospital a strengthened and fully recovered woman, she gave the doctor \$5 and asked if he would be sure that the patient who stayed in that bed after her received a loaf of bread and heard the story of God's provision for their lives and, if they felt so moved, would buy a loaf for the person who came after them. The scholarship for bread has grown so much that today a loaf of freshly baked Challah is delivered to every Jewish patient in that hospital each week on the eve of the Sabbath.

God does not give bread to those for whom there is no hope. Life in any wilderness is possible with the daily provision of our God. In the gospel of John Jesus said, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life." The disciples said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst ... The one who eats this bread will live forever." Amen.